

# Men's music ability and attractiveness to women in a real-life courtship context

Psychology of Music

0(0) 1–5

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0305735613482025

pom.sagepub.com

**Nicolas Guéguen**

Université de Bretagne-Sud, France

**Sébastien Meineri**

Université de Bretagne-Sud, France

**Jacques Fischer-Lokou**

Université de Paris-Sud, France

## Abstract

This experiment tested the assumption that music plays a role in sexual selection. Three hundred young women were solicited in the street for their phone number by a young male confederate who held either a guitar case or a sports bag in his hands or had no bag at all. Results showed that holding a guitar case was associated with greater compliance to the request, thus suggesting that musical practice is associated with sexual selection.

## Keywords

*attractiveness, courtship, guitar, music*

Previous studies have found that various factors influence women's receptivity to a courtship solicitation addressed by a man. Touching the forearm of a woman when asking her for her phone number is associated with greater compliance than when no tactile contact occurred (Guéguen, 2007). Guéguen, Marchand, Pascual, and Lourel (2008) reported that using a foot-in-the-door technique for a courtship request addressed by a male confederate is associated with a higher level of women's compliance to the request.

Research has also shown that factors associated with men's physical appearance or social status increased their attractiveness to women. Guéguen (2009) found that women agreed more readily to give their phone number to an unknown man in a street when he wore a fire-fighter's uniform. Recently, Guéguen and Lamy (2012) manipulated men's apparent income

---

## Corresponding author:

Nicolas Guéguen, Université de Bretagne-Sud – LSHS, 4 rue Jean Zay, 56100 Lorient, France.

Email: nicolas.gueguen@univ-ubs.fr

and social status by using different cars. A male confederate, waiting in a high-, middle-, or low-value car opened the car door when a woman was near the car and asked for the woman's phone number. It was found that female participants were more likely to give their phone number to a young man who appeared to own the high-value car. These results are congruent with evolution theory and the differential parental investment theory (Trivers, 1972). For women, high income and social value are predictors of security for their offspring. Unlike men, most women can have a few children only. Thus, they need to be sure that their offspring will have the material resources that can help them to survive. Given that women value men with higher incomes and status (Buss, 1989; Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993; Shackelford, Schmitt, & Buss, 2005), one could hypothesize that factors that signal men's abilities could have an influence on women's receptivity to courtship solicitation addressed by a man with apparent higher abilities. Thus, a visual cue associated with musical practice could be a good sign of such personal abilities.

### *Traits of music ability and sexual selection*

Congruent with an evolutionary perspective, Darwin (1871) has explained human music in terms of sexual selection, while Miller (2000) stated that human music acted as bird song and played a role in sexual courtship. Miller (2000) found that more than 90% of the principal music producers of jazz, rock and classical albums were males. Sluming and Manning (2000) stated that males could use music in courtship because women are receptive to music. Sanders and Wenmoth (1998) reported that women's performance in music dichotic listening tasks was influenced by their menstrual cycle, and showed that women are more influenced by music during ovulation. Guéguen, Jacob, and Lamy (2010) reported that women previously exposed to romantic songs consented more readily to give their phone number to a male confederate than women exposed to neutral songs.

The latter two studies suggest that music could play a role in women's receptivity to a courtship request and that male music producers could have an advantage over other men. Sluming and Manning (2000) reported that symphony orchestra male musicians, compared with males of the general population, were associated with lower ratios of the length of the second and fourth digit (2D:4D), which is a marker of prenatal testosterone levels. For Sluming and Manning, prenatal testosterone could facilitate musical ability and is associated with good genes and fertility. Hence, women could use men's musical ability as a way to select a better mate. In order to test this evolutionary theory of musical ability in sexual selection, we conducted a field experiment whereby a man holding a guitar case in the street, or not, was asked to approach women and request their phone number. It was hypothesized that a man holding a guitar case in his hands would elicit a higher level of compliance to his request than when requesting women without a guitar case in his hands.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The participants were 300 young females with an estimated age between 18 and 22 years, who were walking alone in several shopping streets of a medium-sized city (population greater than 70,000) in France. The experiment was conducted on a sunny Saturday afternoon at the beginning of the summer period.

## Procedure

A 20-year-old man, previously evaluated as having a high level of physical attractiveness, acted as confederate in this experiment. The physical attractiveness of the confederate had been evaluated by a group of 22 young women who were instructed to examine photographs of the faces of 14 male volunteers and to rate their attractiveness on a numerical scale going from 1 (low level of physical attractiveness) to 10 (high level of physical attractiveness). The selected confederate was the one who received the highest attractiveness score. The attractiveness measure was used because previous studies had shown that young women are reluctant to comply with such a request addressed in the street (Guéguen, 2007; Guéguen et al., 2008). The confederate was not informed of the study hypothesis.

The participants were selected following a random assignment in which the confederate was instructed to approach the first young woman in the age group (18–22 years) who appeared alone on the pedestrian walkway. He was instructed not to select a participant according to her physical attractiveness, the way she was dressed, her height, etc. He was instructed to wait until a young woman between approximately 18 and 22 years of age passed by him in the street, and then to approach her.

The confederate was instructed to approach the young women with a smile and to say, “Hello. My name’s Antoine. I just want to say that I think you’re really pretty. I have to go to work this afternoon, and I was wondering if you would give me your phone number. I’ll phone you later and we can have a drink together someplace.”

The phone number was solicited because a previous study carried out in France showed that this request made in the street is clearly seen by women as a courtship solicitation (Guéguen, 2007). Moreover, this solicitation was accompanied by another request (to have a drink) which was also previously evaluated as a courtship solicitation. According to the experimental conditions, the confederate held in his hands a black acoustic guitar case (guitar case condition), a large black sports bag (sports bag control condition), or nothing (no bag control condition). After testing 10 women in one condition, the confederate was instructed to move to another area and to select a new experimental condition according to a random distribution.

After making his request, the confederate was instructed to wait 10 seconds and to gaze and smile at the participant. If the participant accepted the confederate’s solicitation, the confederate noted her phone number, said “See you soon,” and left the participant. If the participant refused, the confederate was instructed to say, “Too bad. It’s not my day. Have a nice afternoon!” and to leave the participant.

## Results

The number of participants who complied with the confederate’s solicitation was the only dependent variable in this study. In the guitar case condition, 31% of the women gave their phone number to the confederate, compared to 9% in the sports bag condition and 14% in the no bag control condition. An overall difference was found ( $\chi^2(2, N = 300) = 18.02, p = .003, V = .14$ ). The guitar case condition was significantly different from the sports bag condition ( $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 15.12, p = .001, V = .27$ ) and the no bag control condition ( $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 8.29, p = .004, V = .20$ ) whereas no difference was found between the sports bag condition and the no bag control condition ( $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 1.22, p = .27, V = .08$ ).

## Discussion

This study, carried out in a real-life setting and with a behavioural measure, showed that women solicited in the street for their phone number agreed more readily with the request when the solicitation was performed by a young man holding a guitar case in his hands. When the confederate held a bag that could not be perceived as a guitar case (the sports bag condition), the level of compliance decreased dramatically, suggesting that the effect found in the guitar case condition is not explained by the presence of a bag per se, but really by the guitar contained in the bag. The behavioural results found in this experiment clearly support the assumption that a man holding a guitar is more attractive to women, thus providing support to the theory that music could play a role in sexual selection (Miller, 2000).

Two theoretical explanations could be used to explain this attractiveness effect of a man holding a guitar in his hands. In this study, holding the guitar case was perhaps perceived as a trait associated with good genes and fertility. Sluming and Manning (2000) argued that accomplished male musicians were probably not exposed to the same prenatal testosterone levels as other men, which could have a later influence both on their musical ability and fertility. Secondly, playing music is perhaps associated with physical and intellectual abilities by women. A host of previous studies routinely have shown that across cultures, women, more than men, value good financial prospects and higher status in mate selection (Buss, 1989; Kenrick et al., 1993; Shackelford et al., 2005). Playing music may perhaps be interpreted by women as a personal trait related to intelligence, hard work levels, or physical abilities, which are important traits in evaluating the probability of men's obtaining a higher status and success in financial prospects.

Previous courtship behavioural research has found that women are more receptive to a dating request addressed by a man with an apparent high status, such as that given by a high-value car (Guéguen & Lamy, 2012). Accomplished musicians or rock stars are well-known and highly respected, and some of them are known to earn considerable sums of money. Thus, by extension, male musicians are perhaps perceived to have more opportunities to earn money and to have a high social status, which, in turn, will increase their attractiveness to women. Of course, these two explanations are not mutually exclusive, and both could explain why a musician appears to be more attractive to women. It would be worth testing each explanation in further studies. If playing music is associated with good genes and fertility, women are probably more influenced by signals of musical practice for short-term relationships than for long-term relationships. In contrast, if male musicians are associated with a higher social status and income, women are probably more influenced by male musical practice for long-term relationships than for short-term relationships. This experiment was limited to short-term relationships, and it might be worth testing whether the attractiveness effect of male musicians is associated with long- or short-term relationships. A further explanation could also be suggested to explain the results found in this experimental study. Participants were attracted to the man with guitar case because of the impression that acoustic guitarists are cool and fun. Research found that stereotypes are associated with music genres and that many of these music-genre stereotypes possess a kernel of truth (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2007). Thus, in this study, such stereotype activated by the exposure to the guitar case could have influenced the behavioral response of the participants toward the confederate.

This experiment has some limitations. Only one confederate was used, and his physical attractiveness was high. Generalization to other male confederates with various attractiveness levels remains in question. The confederate was not informed of the real objective of the study

and previous research findings on this topic. However, he may have unconsciously behaved differently in each experiment condition, which in turn could have influenced the participants' decision. Only one instrument was manipulated in this study, and it would also be worth testing different instruments in order to see whether this attractiveness effect is associated with the guitar per se (a well-known instrument, present in most of the famous rock bands all over the world) or with any musical instrument. By this way, it could also be possible to test the validity of the stereotype activation of music genre or instrument genre addressed above.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## References

- Buss, D. M. (1989). Sex differences in human mate preferences: Evolutionary hypotheses tested in 37 cultures. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 12(1), 1–14.
- Darwin, C. (1871). *The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex*. London, UK: John Murray.
- Guéguen, N. (2007). The effect of a man's touch on woman's compliance to a request in a courtship context. *Social Influence*, 2, 81–97.
- Guéguen, N. (2009). Man's uniform and receptivity of women to courtship request: Three field experiments with a firefighter's uniform. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 12(2), 236–241.
- Guéguen, N., Jacob, C., & Lamy, L. (2010). "Love is in the air": Effects of songs with romantic lyrics on compliance to a courtship request. *Psychology of Music*, 38, 303–307.
- Guéguen, N., & Lamy, L. (2012). Men's social status and attractiveness: Women's receptivity to men's date request. *Swiss Journal of Psychology*, 71(3), 157–160.
- Guéguen, N., Marchand, M., Pascual, A., & Lourel, M. (2008). Foot-in-the-door technique using a courtship request: A field experiment. *Psychological Reports*, 103, 529–534.
- Kenrick, D. T., Groth, G. E., Trost, M. R., & Sadalla, E. K. (1993). Integrating evolutionary and social exchange perspectives on relationships: Effects of gender, self-appraisal, and involvement level on mate selection criteria. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64(6), 951–969.
- Miller, G. F. (2000). Evolution of human music through sexual selection. In N. L. Wallin, B. Merker & S. Brown (Eds.), *The origins of music* (pp. 329–360). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Rentfrow, P. J., & Gosling, S. D. (2007). The content and validity of music-genre stereotypes among college students. *Psychology of Music*, 35, 306–326.
- Sanders, G., & Wenmoth, D. (1998). Verbal and music dichotic listening tasks reveal variations in functional cerebral asymmetry across the menstrual cycle that are phase and task dependent. *Neuropsychologia*, 36(9), 869–874.
- Shackelford, T. K., Schmitt, D. P., & Buss, D. M. (2005). Universal dimensions of human mate preferences. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 39(2), 447–458.
- Sluming, V. A., & Manning, J. T. (2000). Second to fourth digit ratio in elite musicians: Evidence for musical ability as an honest signal of male fitness. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 21(1), 1–9.
- Trivers, R. L. (1972). Parental investment and sexual selection. In B. G. Campbell (Ed.), *Sexual selection and the descent of man* (pp. 136–179). Chicago, IL: Aldine.